

# Zapata helps churches focus outwardly

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SAN ANTONIO—Jorge Zapata hopes to help Texas churches in Texas resist the temptation to focus inwardly and instead recognize opportunities to make an impact in their communities.

Before Zapata became San Antonio-based coordinator of missions and Hispanic ministries at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, his ministry was geared toward community outreach and neighborhood involvement. Now, he wants to share his experience with others.



Jorge Zapata

“We work to help establish a bridge between the church and the community,” Zapata said.”

All churches face changes, he recognizes. In the Hispanic context, churches that began with first-generation Spanish-speaking immigrants must learn

to give room to the next generation that tends to be younger, better educated and more comfortable with English.

“They still have the roots, but their way of doing ministry is totally different,” Zapata observed.

## **‘Keep the door wide open’**

But all churches face changes, he recognizes. That’s why his recommendation to Hispanic churches also apply to non-Hispanic churches with whom he works.

First, a church needs to take a hard look at the community surrounding it, Zapata said. Then the church needs to ask, “How inclusive are we going to be?”

When a church opens its doors to others, whether they are of another generation or a different ethnicity, the church is encountering new culture and people who think differently, he observed.

But if the church is true to its calling, it must keep the door wide open, he said.

“You cannot just open a small space,” he said.

## **Revival and relevance**

Looking outwardly and being inclusive can bring a revival to church, Zapata said.

The churches that have grown in their relationship with the community are those congregations that have opened their doors to everyone in the community, he noted.

“The churches become relevant because they are responding to the community,” he observed.

The consequences of a church failing to open up to the community can be devastating, he added.

For a church to become diverse in its membership, diversity must start in its leadership, and it must move beyond tokenism, Zapata insisted.

“You cannot just have one staff member that is a minority,” he said. “The inclusion has to be complete.”

## **Communities respond to churches that care**

Through ministries such as donating school supplies and backpacks to children, bringing medical assistance to families and mentoring the youth in ministry, Zapata has seen how communities can respond positively to the local church.



Children in Hidalgo receive a bed built by Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.

Community ministry takes a variety of forms, he noted. Some churches like First Baptist in Plainview operate community centers. Congregations like

The Crossing in Mesquite offer English-as-a-Second-Language classes. Park Cities Baptist in Dallas sponsors a bed-building ministry that provides for children in colonias along the Rio Grande. Churches like those recognize service to others as acts of worship toward God, Zapata said.

As churches focus outwardly, it opens new doors for ministry and opportunities for partnership, even across denominational lines. Zapata noted 35 non-Baptist churches in the Rio Grande Valley and 15 in the Houston area have contacted him to see if they can partner with CBF Texas. Many of those churches are of Pentecostal background, and they noticed the work CBF churches are doing in their areas.

“They have come to tell me: ‘What you are doing is so great. We thought pastors at your churches were dead, but now we are seeing that is not the case,’” Zapata said.

Churches face challenges as they deal with new generations, other cultures and different denominations, but God always is at work, he added.

“This is like a puzzle, and we are seeing God put the pieces together,” Zapata said.